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Ben Robbins



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Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. Pp. 188. ISBN: 978-0-7546-6717-9.

- 1 Lisa K. Perdigao's monograph titled *From Modernist Entombment to Postmodernist Exhumation*, seeks to offer a comprehensive study of the corpse as represented in American fiction of the twentieth century. Perdigao explores how novelists from a range of time periods and traditions use dead bodies as a device that is revealing of the wider formal ambitions of narrative.
- 2 In her introduction, Perdigao sets out the theoretical framework on which her study is based. She draws on poststructuralist theories that foreground the gap between the materiality of the body and the discursivity of language. Within this tradition, she asserts, that the corpse is a figure within literature that lies "at the utter limit of representation," since it is a "liminal figure that looms at the outer limits of language" (1). She uses Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject here to elaborate this crisis of representation; in *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva asserts that the corpse "disturbs identity, system, order" (4), as part of an abject space beyond fixed material identity, the "place where meaning collapses" (2). As such, corpses are formally bound with moments of narratological crisis across all the texts that are analysed. Perdigao also frequently uses Peter Brooks's theories of plot to develop her argument, responding to his charge that modern plots move towards death with a teleological desire for resolution. This desire manifests itself formally, for Brooks in *Reading for the Plot*, as a narrative progression, as Perdigao explains, "toward a

totalizing metaphor, a metaphoric transaction" (8). Perdigao sees this formal strategy as being generated by the struggle involved in representing corpses. She observes, building on Brooks, that "[t]he tension between the material and the discursive is made explicit in the representations of loss, in the writers' choices to represent the physical signs of death (marks of violence on bodies, signs of decay) or to transform dead bodies into something representative, symbolic, anything but a corpse" (8). Thus she establishes a series of binaries that structure her argument – alongside the tension between the material and the discursive, metonym and metaphor in the representation of the dead, she adds the opposition of the modern and postmodern. Perdigao's key thesis here is that a shift occurs in the use of tropes to respond to the material reality of the corpse – while modernist writers favour entombment and burial, postmodernist writers return to the body by means of exhumation. Around these twin tropes, the figurative principles of metaphor and metonymy coalesce. She asserts that, in narrative, "[t]he totalizing metaphor is achieved through the burial of the dead while the deferral of such transaction (and resolution) and turn to metonymy is at the centre of the exhumation plot" (10). Essentially here, entombment is seen as a symbolic usurpation of the corpse, while exhumation a tactile return to the material reality of the same. In analysing narratives that handle dead bodies in the chapters that follow, she teases out how these theoretical oppositions stand in relief, merge, and unravel across modernist and postmodernist narratives.

- 3 William Faulkner's oft-cited line from his late novel *Requiem for a Nun*, "The past is never dead, it's not even past" (535) is frequently used to uphold his status as one of the great chroniclers of American cultural memory but it also comments on the ability of suppressed bodies (literal or figurative) to erupt into the present and the dangers that entails for narration. Perhaps it is no surprise then that Perdigao chooses to turn to Faulkner in her first chapter, as well as F. Scott Fitzgerald, to analyse the modernist handling of the corpse motif. She asserts that both Faulkner and Fitzgerald employ narrative strategies of concealment when confronted with the violated body – for Perdigao, the crisis of representation is resolved through burial in these authors' works. In her analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, Perdigao demonstrates how the graphic materiality of the description of Myrtle Wilson's death after a car accident (the prose famously describes that "her left breast was swinging loose like a flap and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath" 149) incurs a crisis of representation for the protagonist, Nick Carraway. Such degrading detailing of the corpse is given up at the conclusion of the novel in pursuit of the performance of a burial plot as Nick gathers consoling metaphors for the dead bodies of both Myrtle and Gatsby to secure a form of resolution. While this reading of *Gatsby* is convincing, I find Perdigao's reading of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* too selective in its analysis of corpses within the novel. Perdigao analyses the scene in which Temple Drake recounts how she was raped and uses the striking metaphor of being a dead bride in a coffin to show how the female body is transformed as "a response to the nonnarratability of the act of rape" (42). This scene from the novel does indeed enact a tension between the material and the discursive, dissolved through a "figurative entombment" (44), but it is not the only dead body depicted in the novel. At the gangster Red's funeral, the coffin is dropped; Red's corpse rolls "sedately" out onto the floor and the wax stop that had been covering the bullet wound to his head is dislodged and misplaced, revealing "a small blue hole in the centre of his forehead" (171). Perdigao doesn't mention the passage, but here Faulkner does not shy away from the material reality of the dead body at all, and in fact purposefully disrupts the supposed resolution

of the modernist burial plot. In the same scene, the nightclub owner's plea to the orchestra to "Play something!" (171) in an attempt to mask the coffin-dropping mishap for the gathered crowd, may show Faulkner commenting playfully on how improvised attempts at modernist concealment of the corpse are and would offer more balance to Perdigao's argument here. Such a problematization of the burial trope is a technique Perdigao acknowledges more fully in her approach to *As I Lay Dying*. She rightly asserts that Addie Bundren's body, carried by her family to her chosen place of burial in the town of Jefferson, rejects transformation "asserting her materiality through a chain of metonymies" (44); the physical reality of the corpse (such as the smell of Addie's decaying body emanating from the coffin) is one of the many metonymical details that fail to be discursively transformed.

- 4 While not in strict chronological progression from the previous chapter, in Chapter 2, the book chooses to focus on Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, showing how these works further problematize the modernist burial trope and clear space for the postmodern narrative of exhumation. For Perdigao, these novels demonstrate how the body's materiality continually disrupts the burial narrative and thus exposes its limitations. Though this transition is well argued, it does not appear to be such a radical shift as this problematizing function is something that already seems to be addressed in Faulkner's modernism.
- 5 Chapters 3 and 4 engage with the postmodern novel's embrace of the limits of representation in narrative. Considering works by Jody Shields, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler and Jeffrey Eugenides, Perdigao documents how these writers attempt to recover the bodies buried in modernist writing. This process goes through two phases – novelists such as Shields and Morrison express the need to recover and rematerialize the bodies of the dead, whereas Butler and Eugenides further problematize this very process, engaging with the difficulties of writing the exhumed and recovered body. That the postmodern plot comes apart when it is confronted with materialised dead bodies is formally illustrative of the problems of such a recovery. Eugenides's comment that the numerous readings of the Lisbon girls' deaths in *The Virgin Suicides* was "like picking over a corpse after a while" seems suggestive of the centrality of troubling dead bodies to the novel's structure. Perdigao's charge that "the abject demands and gets new forms of intelligibility in the form of the book of the dead" (105) in a novel like *The Virgin Suicides* is a convincing argument and is well elaborated. Perdigao argues that postmodern texts, "with suspended bodies at their centers, suggest that problems in space, time, metaphor and metonymy result in disarticulation, dismembrance, and dismemberment, an extension of what happens in Eliot's dead land [in *The Waste Land*]" (105). If extension, rather than transition, is what occurs between modernism and postmodernism in dealing with the traces of death, I would have liked this point to be explored more fully here.
- 6 Chapter 5 goes some way to address this point by attempting to bridge the gap between the modern and the postmodern through focusing on how Alice Walker exhumes an earlier text – Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* – across her fiction, poetry and prose by continually revisiting Hurston's burial plot (both the sequence of events contained in the novel and the actual site of the author's grave). This intertextual angle dismantles the oppositional structure of the book's argument to show how entombment and exhumation are complementary drives (just as much as modernism and postmodernism are mutually informing cultural movements).

- 7 Perdigao's wide-ranging study of the twin tropes of entombment and exhumation in 20th century American fiction is argued in sustained and lucid fashion. The book's focus on dead bodies successfully illuminates the points of antagonism and confluence among many of the central oppositions of contemporary literary theory, and demonstrates an innovative application of poststructuralist ideas concerning discourse. Perdigao's theme does seem timely given the post-9/11 emphasis on analysing and assessing rituals of memorialisation in response to loss in American culture, a significance that she acknowledges in her conclusion. The comparison suggests that through excavating the literature of loss, perhaps we can come closer to apprehending the depth of contemporary catastrophe.
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AUTHOR

BEN ROBBINS

Ph.D Candidate, John-F.-Kennedy-Institute, Freie Universität, Berlin